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ABSTRACT

A study focused on the ways in which students conceptualize college teachers as authority figures, and examined differences between the ways in which male and female teachers were perceived. The sample examined consisted of 269 college freshmen enrolled at a private liberal arts college in either remedial freshman composition (94 students) or in general freshman composition (173 students). A questionnaire was developed to survey students' attitudes towards instructors with whom they had had minimal experience. Results suggest that there have been few changes in gender-based expectations of teachers in the last 10 to 15 years. The present study, however, does offer new insight into how students apply gender expectations. Although female instructors were more likely to be judged as possessing stereotypically feminine traits, male instructors were not accordingly judged as possessing stereotypical male traits. The present study suggests that female instructors are more likely to be judged as "types," while male instructors are more likely to be judged as individuals. These findings may explain why it is that female instructors have been judged more harshly for failing to comply with gender stereotypes than have male instructors. (Contains 30 references.) (Author/TB)

Are You My Mother?
Students' Expectations of Teachers and Teaching as related to Faculty Gender

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Abstract

This research focused on the ways in which students conceptualize college teachers as authority figures, and examined differences between the ways in which male and female teachers were perceived. The sample examined in the present study consisted of 269 college freshmen who were enrolled at a private liberal arts college in either remedial freshmen composition (94 students) or in general freshmen composition (173 students). A questionnaire was developed to survey students' attitudes towards instructors with whom they had had minimal experience.

Results suggest that there have been few changes in gender-based expectations of teachers in the last ten to fifteen years (comparing the results of this study with the findings of Basow & Silberg, 1987; Bennett, 1982; Kierstead, D'Agostino, & Dill, 1988). The present study, does, however, offer new insight into how students apply gender expectations. Although female instructors were more likely to be judged as possessing stereotypically feminine traits, male instructors were not accordingly judged as possessing stereotypically male traits. The present study suggests that female instructors are more likely to be judged as "types," while male instructors are more likely to be judged as individuals. These findings may explain why it is that female instructors have been judged more harshly for failing to comply with gender stereotypes than have male instructors.

Increasingly, researchers and theorists have investigated the relationships that exist between composition studies and gender, and have explored what has been called "the feminization of composition studies" (Miller, 1993). Flynn (1988) has written that "the emerging field of composition studies could be described as a feminization of our previous conceptions of how writers write and how writing should be taught" (p. 423). Feminist pedagogy, which has significantly influenced the teaching of writing, has placed a high priority on establishing a supportive and accepting climate and in advocating a student-centered approach to teaching (Trimbur, 1989; Jarratt, 1991; Tobin, 1991; Finke, 1993; Mlynarczyk, 1994). This has focused attention on the teacher-student relationship and on the positive gains that can be made when students are encouraged to share their personal experiences in the classroom, to make connections between their learning and their own experiences, and to enter into dialogue with their teachers (Shiffman, 1992; Mlynarczyk, 1994).

The purpose of this study was to gather information about expectations that freshmen students bring to their college writing classrooms regarding teachers and teaching. More specifically, this research focused on the ways in which students conceptualize college instructors as authority figures, and examined differences between the ways in which male and female instructors were perceived.

Theoretical Background

The teacher-student relationship has often been compared to the relationship that exists between mother and child. Lamb (1991) suggests that the mother/teacher labors to provide "attentive love, or loving attention," interaction, and connectedness rather than reproducing the male structures of hierarchy, objectivity, and separation (p. 16). In texts discussing women, rhetoric, and teaching, frequently "the figure of a caring, responsive mother/teacher emerges as a model" (Clark, 1995, p. 109).

The image of the mother/teacher has not gone unchallenged, however. Critics have charged that replacing the figure of the authoritative father with an image of the nurturing mother "merely insidiously reterritorializes power relations" (Baliff, 1993, p. 7). In both scenarios, the game is the same: normalization and social reproduction (Mowrey, 1993; Walkerdine, 1992). Jarratt (1991) has also pointed out that insufficient attention has been paid to the psychological complexities and ambivalencies regarding the conjunction of mothering and teaching.

Contradictory reactions to the image of the mother/teacher have not been limited to abstract theoretical discussions. In discussions of their own practices, teachers often either identify themselves as maternal figures or deliberately distance themselves from the role. Belanger (1991), interviewing composition teachers about their uses of the Bartholomae and Petrosky text Ways of Reading, details the practice of several teachers who discuss their pedagogies with references to maternal imagery. "Nancy" describes

herself as maternal and caring, ready to accept students' feelings because "It's Mom you go to when it hurts," while "Mark," in a self-assessment of his teaching style, states, "If students ask for help, I help. If not, I figure, 'I'm not your mother. You decide whether you need help or not" (p. 15; p. 11). Although in these case studies, the female teacher embraces the mother/teacher role while the male teacher denies it, Belanger also presents evidence of male teachers who describe themselves as caregivers. It is also clear that not all females feel comfortable being cast in the maternal role. Buffington (1993), defending her stance in the composition classroom, ends with the almost-cliched lines: "After all, I'm not their mother. I'm their teacher" (p. 10).

The debate over the image of the mother/teacher (or "doing the mother") reveals a deeper struggle within both composition studies and feminism: the struggle over conceptualizations and enactments of power and authority. As teachers of composition (in general) and women teachers of composition (in particular) have begun to gain institutional power and authority, it has become increasingly hard to ignore the very real power that they hold over their students (Tobin, 1991; Fink, 1993). In response, several researchers and theorists have proposed dialogic models of authority which address these assymetric power relationships (Mortensen & Kirsch, 1993; Jarratt, 1991). Jarratt has suggested that the differences and the conflicts that students bring to the classroom need to be acknowledged and addressed. Only then can they can be used as the foundation for a pedagogy which recognizes

conflict and which works toward a progressive mode of discourse.

Several studies have attempted to describe the differences and conflicts that students bring to the classroom. A number of discussions have focused on male students' resistance to female/feminist teachers (Murphy, 1992; Hayes, 1992; Farris, 1992; Eichorn, 1992; Powers-Stubbs, 1992). One explanation of this resistance infers that students assume that higher education is a man's job and as such, a female educational authority in a college setting is "startling" (Kasik, 1993, p. 9). Other studies have suggested that women faculty members can maintain their authority in the classroom only when they conform to traditional cultural stereotypes. When female instructors refuse to enact a mothering role, students may feel betrayed, confused, and/or angered (Hernandez, 1992). Powers-Stubbs (1992), describing her teaching experiences, reports:

> It seemed that I was the authority in the classroom only as long as I remained within prescribed boundaries...My experience convinces me that the gender-related expectations that students hold are tenacious and difficult to disrupt (314).

The acknowledgement and even the disruption of students' expectations may prove to be valuable, but a clearer sense of what those expectations are and how they may vary among students is needed. Previous research on students' attitudes has suggested that male professors tend to receive significantly higher ratings on clarity of presentation, are less likely to be judged negatively when they are perceived as difficult graders, and are more likely to be perceived as powerful and effective than are female

professors (Goodwin & Stevens, 1993; Kierstead, D'Agostino, & Dill, 1988; Basow & Silberg, 1987; Kaschak, 1981). Female professors, however, tend to be perceived as warmer, more supportive, and with a more concerned interest in others (Bennett, 1982; Kaschak, 1981). Although both male and female teachers who fit social stereotypes receive better evaluations than do teachers who deviate from these stereotypes (Kierstead, D'Agostino, & Dill, 1988; Bennett, 1982; Martin, 1984), women teachers are found to be "more negatively evaluated than men if they fail to meet gender-appropriate expectaions" (Kierstead, D'Agostino, & Dill, 1988; Martin, 1984).

Various researchers have also pointed out the contradictory nature of students' expectations of female instructors. As women, these individuals are expected to be warm, friendly, and supportive, but as college professors, they are supposed to be objective, authoritarian, and critical (Kierstead, D'Agostino, & Dill, 1988; Martin, 1984). Eichorn's review (1992) of the research on students' gender-based expectations of faculty concludes:

> These findings indicate in an everyday way the difficulties of establishing authority for any female teacher....Establishing authority as a feminist writing teacher is made even more problematic by some student-centered composition theories which seek to radically displace teacher authority in general (299).

The difficulties that female teachers encounter in establishing their authority in the classroom also may be experienced by male teachers who practice feminist or student-centered pedagogies. Male teachers who attempt to dialogue with their students or to be more supportive may disrupt students' expectations of male authority. Previous research also indicates

that teachers who are teach from a structured, current-traditional pedagogy are more likely to be regarded by students as more organized and professional. Similarly, teachers who try to actively engage students in the learning process have been perceived as less-well organized, less competent, and lacking an adequate grasp of the subject matter (Bennett, 1982; Sandler, 1991; Macke, Richardson, & Cook, 1980).

The Present Study

The present study adds to the previous research by focusing specifically on the expectations that students bring to the writing classroom. In addition, as the majority of studies which have previously examined students' expectations of faculty are at least ten years old, this research investigates the possibility that cultural stereotypes influencing gender expectations may have changed over time.

Method

Participants

The sample examined in the present study consisted of 269 college freshmen who were enrolled at a private liberal arts college in either remedial freshmen composition (94 students) or in general freshmen composition (173 students). From this population, only the responses of traditional college freshmen were analyzed. These were students who identified themselves as being between 17 and 19 years of age and who had not previously earned college

credits. This more homogenous sample of students who had not had previous college classroom experience was comprised of 221 students: 111 were males and 110 were females. Ninety-eight students were in classes taught by male instructors; 123 students were in classes taught by females. A chi-square text of independence found no significant relationship between student gender and faculty gender.

In the fall of 1994, ten instructors at the college taught either remedial or general composition. Eight of the ten instructors were identified as having completed advanced degree programs; letters requesting their participation in the study were delivered to their campus mail addresses. All eight instructors agreed to participate in the study, consenting to survey students in their classes during the first week of the term. Three instructors were male; five were female. Three instructors were full-time employees of the college (2 males and 1 female); five were part-time (1 male and 4 females). The average age of the instructors was 47 years (male instructors averaged 51 years of age; female instructors averaged 45 years of age), and instructors averaged seven years of experience in teaching at the college (male instructors averaged 9.7 years of experience; female instructors averaged 5.4 years of experience). Seven of the teachers had earned masters degress; one had earned a Ph.D. (a female instructor).

Instrumentation

A questionnaire was developed specifically for this study and was designed to survey students' attitudes towards instructors with whom they had had minimal experience. The questionnaire was administered during the first week of the semester, as this study assumed that students' evaluations of their instructors, after only minimal contact with those instructors, would be more reflective of the students' own stereotypical expectations of the teachers than of actual teacher behavior. This study, then, differs from previous methods of measuring student attitudes in that did not ask students to evaluate teachers with whom they had had extensive experience. Neither did it ask students to view video clips of teachers and then "imagine themselves" in a class taught by that teacher (a quasi-projection study). Instead, this study elicted projections from students in real classroom settings.

In developing the questionnaire, a number of previous studies which had examined students' attitudes and expectations were consulted (Bennett, 1982; Sandler, 1991; Kierstead, D'Agostinio, & Dill, 1988; Basow & Silberg, 1987). Initial drafts of the questionnaire were reviewed by two faculty members (who did not participate in the study) for length, clarity, relevance, and sufficiency. The questionnaire was then revised by eliminating or rewriting items that had been perceived as unclear, redundant, or irrelevant. The final draft of the questionnaire was organized into two major sections: student demographics and students' expectations of their writing instructors. Included in the

demographic portion of the questionnaire were items asking students about their age, gender, college experience, major, and high school g.p.a. Included in the expectations portion of the questionnaire were items asking students to identify the gender, title, and rank of the teacher; to predict the character of their future interactions with the teacher; to evaluate the attitudes and demeanor of their teacher; and to provide information regarding their expectations of "good teaching." Responses were either Likert scale or multiple choice answers, with the exception of the last question. This was an open-ended question which asked students to explain themselves if they had indicated, in a previous question, a preference that the class be taught by either a male or a female.

Data Collection Procedures

Instructors who had agreed to participate in the study were provided with packets of the student surveys and with survey instructions to be read to the classes. The directions were as follows:

> This survey is part of a research project which hopes to learn more about faculty-student rapport. Please answer the survey questions as thoughtfully and honestly as possible. The results of your class's answers will not be shared with your instructor during this semester. Unless they request otherwise, instructors will only receive results of the total number of students sampled from a number of classes, not from their individual classes. Do not put your name on your survey; responses will be collected anonymously.

The anonymity of the respondents was necessary to encourage candid responses.

All instructors distributed the questionnaire during the first week of class. Students were allowed approximately 15 minutes to complete their responses, then instructors collected the surveys, placed them in sealed envelopes, and returned them to the researcher via campus mail.

Results

The dependent variable examined in this study was faculty gender; the independent variable was students' perceptions of faculty performance and rapport. A chi-square test of independence was used to examine these variables, and for all analyses, alpha was set at 0.05. In several instances, a statistically significant relationship was determined, but the expected frequency of a cell was found to be less than five (yielding spurious results on chi-square analyses). When this occurred, categories of responses were reexamined. Either the category was omitted from the analysis (i.e., no students thought that their instructor had only earned a B.A. degree), or the category of response was merged with a similar category (i.e., in cases where only a small number of students chose the "strongly disagree" response, this response was merged with that of students choosing "disagree" so as to form one category representing disagreement with the item in question). Chi-square values were then recalculated.

Students were asked twenty-six questions about their perceptions of their teachers. In eleven of these items, students' responses were found to be significantly associated with the gender

of the teacher. Table 1 describes these results. (A chi-square test of independence examining student responses and student gender found no significant relationships between these two variables.)

Female instructors were more likely to be judged "approachable" than were male instructors. Associated with this, students were more likely to describe female teachers as encouraging students ideas, and students reported that they were more likely to make office appointments with female instructors and more likely to call female instructors at home. (Only three students reported that they would definitely not make an office appointment with an instructor; all three were male students with female teachers.) Although not statistically significant at the 0.05 level, it is also noteworthy that students indicated that they would be more likely to discuss another student's plagarism (X^2 = 6.44, degrees of freedom = 4, $p < .16$) and to share personal problems (X_2 = 5.63, degrees of freedom = 3, $p < .13$) with female, rather than with male instructors.

Female instructors were also more likely to be perceived as "kind and understanding" than were male instructors. Associated with this evaluation, students were more likely to perceive female instructors as permissive (male instructors were more likely to be judged as strict). Students also were more likely to judge female instructors as willing to assist students, and were more likely to ask female instructors for extensions of due dates.

Students' evaluations of faculty rank were also highly gender-dependent: female instructors were most likely to be perceived as

Table 1
Results of chi-square test of independence for students' expectations of teachers, by gender of teachers

	Chi-square statistic	Degrees of freedom
Teacher's rank, as estimated by students	58.7***	2
Importance of teacher's dress and appearance	9.78*	3
Teacher perceived as approachable	7.42**	1
Teacher perceived as kind and understanding	19.13***	1
Teacher perceived as permissive	14.52***	2
Teacher perceived as willing to assist students	24.31***	1
Teacher perceived as encouraging students' ideas	12.21***	2
Students' self-assessed likelihood of requesting extension of due date	11.23*	3
Students' self-assessed likelihood of making an office appointment with teacher to discuss academic difficulties	6.26*	2
Students' self-assessed likelihood of calling teacher at home	38.43***	3
Students' indicated preference for male or female teacher	24.91***	2

* $p < .05$ or less
** $p < .01$ or less
*** $p < .005$ or less

instructors, while male instructors were most likely to be perceived as associate or full professors. Students were also more likely to believe that the dress and appearance of female instructors was important to their professionalism than they were to believe that the dress and appearance of male instructors was important.

Despite the markedly different perceptions of for male and for female instructors, 84% of all students surveyed expressed no preference for either a male or a female instructor. Of the 16% who did express a preference, the best predictor for that preference was the gender of the teacher who was being rated. That is, students were significantly likely to report a preference for the teacher that they had.

In the only open-ended question included in the survey, students were asked to explain their responses to the question which had asked if they had a preference with regard to the gender of the instructor. Those students who expressed no preference frequently defended their choice by asserting that it was the knowledge or experience or qualifications of the teacher that were critical, not the gender of the teacher (67 of the 96 responses, or 70% of the respondents, answered in this way). Students also cited specific teacher personalities or attitudes that were more important than teacher gender (24 of the 96 responses, or 25%). Only 3 of the 96 responses explained the lack of preference with reference to students' own attitudes and expectations ("It doesn't matter as long as you get the grade," or "As long as I learn").

Several students (3 of the 96) seemed to take exception with the question which had asked if they preferred one gender over the other. One student declared, "There should not be a preference to either male or female teaching this class or any other"; another simply replied, "I am not a sexist."

Of those students who did express a preference, thirteen of the 221 students indicated that they would rather be taught by a male instructor. These thirteen students represented approximately 6% of all students participating in the study, and approximately 14% of all students in classes taught by male instructors. Twelve of the thirteen students were in classes taught by male instructors; six were male students and seven were female students. All six of the male students explained their preference for a male instructor by citing personal reasons (i.e., "I learn better," "I feel more comfortable," "I can relate better"). However, only three female students cited personal reasons in defending their preference for a male instructor; the other four females based their preference on gender-specific qualities they believed instructors to possess. Male instructors were viewed as "firm and strict," "exciting to work with," and lending "more authority to a classroom," while female instructors were viewed by one student as "very uncaring and stuck up."

Thirty of the 221 students expressed a preference for a class taught by a female instructor. These thirty students represented approximately 13.5% of all students participating in the study and approximately 24% of all students in classes taught by female

instructors. Twenty-seven of the thirty students were in classes taught by female instructors; sixteen were male students and fourteen were female students. An analysis of students' stated reasons for their preference for a female instructor determined that in slightly less than half of all responses (13 of the 29 open-ended responses), both male and female students indicated that they felt that female instructors were better at the interpersonal aspects involved in teaching: ""Female teachers tend to be more sympathetic towards students that don't understand concepts," "Females are usually more senstive," "they are easier to communicate with," "a female is more willing to help." Slightly over half of both male and female students (16 of the 29 open-ended responses) cited personal reasons for their preference. Female students' personal reasons often were related to the "Comfort Factor": "Being a female helps me relate better to females. Men make me nervous and afraid to discuss things with them." Male students' personal reasons were more varied, including explanations such as "I've always had women teach this course in high school," "I would pay attention more if it was a female teaching the class," and "If the female is good looking, make it a female, but if she isn't, make it a male."

General Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that there have been few changes in gender-based expectations of teachers in the last ten to

fifteen years. The findings that women teachers are expected to be more approachable, understanding and permissive, and are more likely to be judged upon their appearance than are men teachers confirms previous research (Bennett, 1982; Kierstead, Agostin, & Dill, 1988; Sandler, 1991). Despite the increased presence of tenured and full-time women faculty on college campuses, cultural stereotypes remain powerful in shaping the classroom climate. Women may be moving into traditionally male-dominated positions of authority, but they are carrying with them all the baggage of traditional gender expectations.

The present study, does, however, offer new insight into how students apply gender expectations. Although female instructors were more likely to be judged as possessing stereotypically feminine traits, male instructors were not accordingly judged as possessing stereotypically male traits. That is, male instructors were not more likely to be viewed as unapproachable or as expecting students to help themselves. Instead, students were more likely to indicate that they were unsure about the instructor, reserving judgments about male instructors with whom they had not had significant experience. The present study suggests that female instructors are more likely to be judged as "types," while male instructors are more likely to be judged as individuals. These findings may explain why it is that female instructors have been judged more harshly for failing to comply with gender stereotypes than have male instructors (Kierstead, D'Agostin, & Dill, 1988).

The present study also offers new insight into students'

preferences for either male or female instructors. Previous research has suggested that students are motivated by what has been labeled the "Comfort Factor": students are more comfortable with members of their own sex and thus are likely to prefer a same-sex teacher (Sandler, 1991). This research suggests that at least early in the term, students' gender preferences are more likely to coincide with the gender of the professor who is teaching the class. This can be explained by cognitive dissonance theory: students believe that they want what they have. Early in the term, students may be more likely to want to give each class and each teacher "their best shot." Under these conditions, the "Cognitive Dissonance Factor" may shape students' attitudes and expectations more than the "Comfort Factor."

The limitations of this particular study suggest several directions for further research on students' gender-based expectations of composition teachers. The number of students sampled (269) was relatively small, and the study was conducted at a small, relatively conservative, Christian liberal arts college. Future studies should investigate larger student populations and other educational contexts. Additionally, more information is needed as to how students' gender-based expectations of faculty may be altered and changed over time. Students examined in this study were first-semester college students; it is possible that college experience itself might influence students' expectations. Future research should also consider students' expectations of good teaching and teachers at the end of the composition course.

Students' attitudes might be altered by their experiences during the course. Future studies should compare students' early-in-the-term attitudes and expectations with students' attitudes and expectations held at the end of the term. Additionally, students' end-of-the-term attitudes and expectations should be compared with students' responses to standardized teacher evaluations (SIRS). And finally, future research should investigate the ways in which male composition teachers who attempt to implement feminist pedagogies may find themselves in conflict with students' normative expectations.

Tobin (1991) has noted that "unconscious drives and associations...shape the way our students respond to us as teachers" (341). Fink (1993) has called attention to the fact that "feminist pedagogy does not exist in a vacuum" (8). Studies which aim to learn more about students' attitudes and associations are vitally important in helping teachers understand the negotiations that take place within the classroom and in educating the academic community about the contexts in which teaching and learning occurs.

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